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News Article

Tennessee's first lady leads Advocacy Center dedication



Tennessee First Lady Andrea Conte delivered the keynote address Tuesday at the official dedication of the 10th Judicial District Children's Advocacy Center in Athens.

By: **JOHNNY HUTSELL-ROYSTER**

Source: [The Daily Post-Athenian](#)

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The 10th Judicial District Child Advocacy Center provides a vital service and its supporters deserve congratulations for paying off its mortgage in just two years.

That was the message delivered Tuesday by Tennessee's First Lady, Andrea Conte, the keynote speaker at the official dedication of the center at 704 West Madison Avenue in Athens.

Addressing the crowd who gathered for the dedication, the wife of Gov. Phil Bredesen said centers like the one in Athens provide a place of safety for abused children.

"Think what that means. Many of them come back afterwards for

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counseling, but first, this is a place where children can come and tell their stories and charges can be investigated. At these child advocacy centers, the children are always at the center and are given what they need to make productive citizens," Conte said.

Conte said another advantage of the advocacy centers is to "get the word out" that child abuse should be reported and that the abused child should be gotten into the system. "But centers like this don't exist without community support," she said.

Conte went on to recognize some of those supporters by introducing Bonnie Beneke, the president of Child Advocacy Centers; her own deputy, Jodie Folk; and Jeanne Brook, program specialist with the Department of Children's Services who also acts as a liaison with the Child Advocacy Centers.

"We're all working hard to find and tap in on funding for the kind of support we need to sustain these centers. It is my honor to be here today," Conte said.

Conte was introduced and praised by 10th Judicial District Attorney General Jerry Estes, who thanked her for the support she gives to children's advocacy and her recent speeches during "Victim's Rights Week" in both Chattanooga and Knoxville and her address at the recent Tennessee district attorneys' meeting in Franklin.

Earlier this month, Conte also delivered a keynote address on the role of these centers in Tennessee at the National Children's Alliance Leadership Conference in the nation's capital.

"Her support means so much to those of us in the criminal justice system of Tennessee and to those who might get lost in the shuffle," Estes said.

The dedication ceremonies began as Athens Police Capt. Rob Davis called the event an "exciting day for the board members, the staff and the center's volunteers."

Davis, who serves as chairman of the board for both the Child Advocacy Center and the H.O.P.E. Center, then introduced Estes who recognized local dignitaries attending the celebration.

"This center is not just an Athens center or a McMinn County center. It's a Child Advocacy Center for the entire 10th Judicial District," Estes said. "So I want to recognize some of the officials who've supported this effort who are here with us today: They include State Rep. Bob McKee, State Rep. Dwayne Bunch from Cleveland, 10th Judicial District Chancellor Jerri Bryant, McMinn County Executive John Gentry and Meigs County Executive Ken Jones. We also have Kathy Dougherty, who is with the McMinn County School Board, Detective John Daly with the Cleveland Police Department, Athens Chief of Police Chuck Ziegler, James Burris from the Polk County Sheriff's Department and Captain Rob Davis of the Athens Police Department."

Estes said he also wanted to recognize Athens Vice Mayor John Proffitt, "who couldn't be here but he was very instrumental in helping by putting his signature on the dotted line of the mortgage that ended today."

Estes also welcomed officials from the advocacy center in Lenoir City.

"The two important things to remember are these: If a mortgage can be burned after only two years, it shows the phenomenal support of the area," Estes said.

"The second thing to remember is what this does for the community, for there were 304 children who obtained services here this past year. Of all the victims of our criminal justice system, the most vulnerable are children. This center says so much for what this community is willing to provide. This is a major accomplishment."

Estes introduced 10th Judicial District Children's Advocacy Center Director Teresa Grant, whom he referred to as "the driving force behind this."

Said Grant, "I couldn't do this without the support of the community and we could not have paid the mortgage off without the support of all those here. You make my job so much easier." • Email: jhroyster@xtn.net

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